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ABSTRACT

Despite the increase in the number of women entering the work force, the organizational setting is not typically conducive to upward mobility for most women. According to a variety of research studies, the impact of sex role stereotyping clearly suggests a set of communication behaviors appropriate for male managers and a different set appropriate for female managers. Assertive communication is a style that permits honest expression of feelings and needs in a nonthreatening way, in contrast to passive or aggressive communication styles. While increased assertiveness leads to increased self-esteem in women, and most proponents of assertive behavior consider this style essential to upward mobility for women, some research suggests that assertive behavior may be received more positively when exhibited by males. When determining a communication style strategy, a woman might first consider the communication style of the supervisor and of the other men and women working in the organization. She might also consider the support system within the organization, because it is difficult to break norms in a work setting until approximately 30% of the work force has made the behavioral change. While assertive behavior may be a long range goal, it may be counter-productive at the outset of a job. (HTH)

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ASSERTIVENESS: TO BE OR NOT TO BE

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If you believe that the natural place of women is the kitchen and the nursery, you are like English children who consider the cage as the natural habitat of the parrot, having seen one nowhere else. Oh, there may be docile parrots who are content to remain in the cage provided there is enough hemp, corn, and water, and there are those missionary parrots who feel it is their lot in life to keep a family contented by whistling Pretty Polly--but the only parrot worth anyone's genuine concern is the parrot who demands to be released from the cage as a condition of becoming agreeable.

--George Bernard Shaw
1891

Introduction

As 43 million women entered our nation's work force in 1980, increasing interest has been generated concerning the role of women in the organization; unfortunately, simple statistics may most accurately reflect the plight of women seeking upward mobility in the work force when compared to their male counterparts. According to Department of Labor statistics, the average woman's salary today is only 60% of the average salary for men, only 1% of the work force earning over $30,000 annually are women, and the average woman executive earns less than $50,000 annually. Additionally, a study conducted by the Catalyst, Inc. research firm reported that only 2% of the 16,000 directors of our nation's top companies are women (Bird, 1981). Although the average single woman spends 45 years of her life in the work force and the average married woman spends 25 years of her life in the work force, it is evident that the organizational setting is <u>not</u> typically conducive to upward mobility for most women who, like their male counterparts, invest a significant portion of their lives in the "system."

The Impact of Sex-Role Stereotyping on Women

The leadership role of "manager" in the organization has traditionally been linked to men. Organizational theorist Douglas McGregor (1967) wrote:

> The model of a successful manager in our culture is a masculine one. The good manager is aggressive, competitive, firm, just. He is not feminine; he is not soft or yielding or dependent or intuitive in the womanly sense. The very expression of emotion is widely viewed as a feminine weakness that would interfere with effective business practices (p. 23).

Several studies have sought to explore the impact of sex-role stereotypes which have surrounded women in leadership roles and potentially served as attitudinal barriers. For example, Bass, Krusell, and Alexander (1971) reported the attitudes of 174 male managers toward working women. While these male managers did not perceive women as "less capable," data from the questionnaire reported that male managers did not judge women as particularly effective managers. Findings indicated that male managers perceived both men and women would prefer to work for a male supervisor rather than a female supervisor and that the subjects themselves would feel uncomfortable working with a female supervisor. The study concluded that "the problem seems to be that societal norms do not sanction the placement of women in dominant positions. The possibility of women becoming supervisors proved very uncomfortable for the managers" (p. 233).

A study conducted by Deaux and Emswiller (1974) assessed male and female performance in a task group situation. Their findings indicated that when males and females performed equally well on a task traditionally perceived as "male," the male's performance was generally attributed to skill while the female's performance was generally attributed to luck.

Additionally, they discovered that when males performed equally well on a task perceived as "female," these male performances were once again generally attributed to skill. The researchers concluded that regardless of the task, men were generally perceived as more skillful than women.

John Anathanassiades (1974) investigated the communication patterns of females located in subordinate roles with the organization. His findings indicated that

> women feel that they have fewer opportunities to participate in decision-making than men, feel that they do not have sufficient autonomy in their jobs, feel that decisions are too often imposed on them from above, and feel less free than men to express disagreements with superiors (pp. 208-209).

Findings of this study clearly indicated that female perceptions were directly linked to the perceptions of their male superiors; as a result, he suggests that women's use of behaviors which comprise these perceptions should be viewed as "instrumental" or "goal-oriented." According to Anathanassiades,

> it is perfectly conceivable that female subordinates may choose to feign submissiveness, loyalty, enthusiasm, frivolity, or low intellect--simply because they may feel that this kind of stereotyped behavior is prescribed by a male-oriented and dominated organizational culture (p. 109).

Schein (1975) noted the impact of sex-role stereotyping when she recorded perceptions of 300 middle-line male managers and 167 middle-line female managers. Her findings suggested that successful managers as well as males were perceived to be leaders, competitive, self-confident, aggressive, forceful, and ambitious; women, on the other hand, were not perceived to possess any of these characteristics. Schein concluded

from these findings that to "think manager" meant to "think male" and that sex-role stereotyping carried potentially negative impact for the selection of female managers.

Baird (1976) reviewed relevant research directed toward the exploration of male/female differences in group communication; specifically, his findings reinforced principles of role theory related to leadership style. His review indicated that males are

> encouraged to be independent, aggressive, problem-oriented, and risk-taking in their interactions, more active and aggressive verbally, more interested and capable in problem-solving, more willing to take risks, more resistant to social influence, more competitive when bargaining, and more likely to assume leadership in task-oriented situations (p. 192).

Group research further indiated that females are

> taught to be noncompetitive, dependent, empathic, passive, and interpersonally oriented, typically are more willing to self-disclose, more expressive of emotions and perception of others' emotional states, more sensitive to nonverbal cues, less interested and able in problem-solving, relatively unwilling to assume risks, more yielding to social pressure, more cooperative in bargaining, and less likely to assume leadership, although capable of providing leadership in certain situations (p. 192).

Birdsall (1980) examined the communication styles of male and female managers in two organizations--a bank and a social service agency. His findings suggested that both male and female managers shared similar descriptions of themselves as managers typically associated with the positive attributes of an individual sex-typed as "masculine." These self-descriptors included such characteristics as "assertive, with a strong personality, leadership abilities, able to defend one's own beliefs and make decisions easily, etc." (p. 192). According to

Birdsall, women are perfectly capable of perceiving themselves similarly to male managers. If these findings are generalizable beyond the two organizations studied,

> members of upper-level management need not be concerned that women (managers) are less willing than men to act as a leader, instruct employees, or disseminate information as part of their managerial work; women perform these communicative tasks quite similarly to men (p. 195).

While most sex-role research has typically suggested male and female stereotypes which potentially impede female success in management, some research has suggested that women have begun to perceive their management role in terms of more positive "female" images. For example, Woods (1975) interviewed nearly 100 women in various levels of management and asked them to identify characteristics which were essential for their management success. From a list of ten common characteristics which emerged, they noted such characteristics as competence, self-confidence, career-mindedness, and strategy (having goals or plans) as well as femininity (not playing a male role) and uniqueness (ability to use the unique talents and assets of women). The characteristics noted by these successful female managers indicated an increased identification with positive male supervisory images as well as the emergence of some uniquely feminine positive supervisory images.

Further, Baird and Bradley (1979) investigated the perceived communication styles of male and female managers by questioning subordinates of those managers. Their data indicated that males and females have very distinct leadership styles exhibited in management. Female managers did not merely "enact" the male manager's role; instead, the researchers concluded that women "communicate in ways markedly different from the

behaviors exhibited by male managers " (p. 108). For example, while men are perceived more dominant and directive, women are perceived more effective in interpersonal relations, more receptive to new ideas, and more likely to demonstrate encouragement. Findings suggested that females were slightly more effective managers than males, but discussion by Baird and Bradley explained that "because of biases against women executives, a female manager must indeed be superior to a male manager in order to achieve results equal to his" (p. 111). In general, the study concluded that male and female managerial styles, while different, are both appropriate to specific management situations.

While a review of literature identifies a variety of interpersonal behaviors perceived to be appropriate for managers, the impact of sex-role stereotyping clearly suggests two sets of behaviors--a set appropriate for male managers and a set appropriate for female managers. Among the prevalent labels used to describe male managers in the literature, the terms "aggressive," "competitive," "forceful," and "independent" appear frequently. For female managers, however, the terms "passive," "noncompetitive," "submissive," and "yielding" suggest quite different images. At best, studies indicate that a woman may adopt male perceptions of herself to perform effectively in the management role; at worst, a woman may deny her management skills as a tactic she perceives will be viewed more positively by her male counterparts. With such options it is no wonder that, according to Herman (1978), for women to choose typical male sex role stereotypic behaviors "is often threatening, frustrating, and painful. Women making this choice often lose traditional support systems and because of such dependent attitudes and training confuse being feminine with being aggressive" (p. 123).

For purposes of this paper, I will explore briefly three communication styles typically available in interpersonal interactions--passive, aggressive, and assertive communication. While discussion of these communication styles is valuable for both males and females in the organization, this paper will focus primarily on the impact of these communication styles as they are utilized by women, perceived by women, and perceived by men. Perhaps such an exploration will provide useful information for women as they explore the communicative options available in the organizational setting.

Interpersonal Communication Styles

Andrew Salter was the originator of assertive behavior therapy when he wrote Conditional Reflex Therapy in 1949. In this work Salter strongly urged the use of specific behaviors to develop an assertive style of interaction to overcome shyness and avoidance. Joseph Wolpe, in his 1958 work entitled Psychotherapy by Reciprocal Inhibition, was the first to identify the term "assertive" in print and recommend assertive behavior for those exhibited anxiety and passivity with others. An examination of interpersonal communication styles with a focus on assertion training as a counseling technique to increase self-expression has continued to grow since the late 1950's (Bate, 1976). Perhaps the most widely-accepted definitions of assertive, non-assertive, and aggressive communication styles are reflected in the book The New Assertive Woman (Bloom, Coburn, and Pearlman, 1975). In this book the authors attempt to delineate these interpersonal communication styles by identifying the underlying motivation and resulting verbal and nonverbal behaviors for each (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMPONENTS OF BEHAVIORS*

	NON-ASSERTIVE (PASSIVE)	ASSERTIVE	AGGRESSIVE
1. VERBAL	apologetic words veiled meanings hedging, failure to come to the point failure to say what you mean at a loss for words	statement of wants honest statement of feelings objective words direct statements which say what you mean "I" messages	loaded words accusations descriptive, subjective terms imparious, superior "you" statements which blame and label
2. NONVERBAL			
a. General	actions instead of words hoping someone will guess what you want looking as if you don't mean what you say	attentive listening behavior general assured manner communicating caring and strength	exaggerated show of strength flippant, sarcastic style, air of superiority
b. Specific			
1. voice	weak, hesitant, soft, wavering	firm, warm, relaxed, well-modulated	tense, shrill, loud, shaky cold, deadly, quiet, demanding, superior,
2. eyes	averted, downcast, teary, pleading	open, frank, direct, eye contact, but not staring	superior, authoritarian, expressionless, narrowed, cold staring, not really seeing you
3. posture	lean for support, stooped, excessive head nodding	well-balanced, erect, relaxed	
4. hands	fidgety, fluttery, clammy	relaxed motions	clenched, abrupt gesture, finger-pointing, fist pounding

*From The New Assertive Woman
Lynn Z. Bloom, Karen Coburn, and Joan Pearlman
Dell Books, 1975

Briefly, these authors describe "passive communication" as the communication style which denies or restricts the individual's rights because she fails to express needs and desires. As a result of this behavior, the non-assertive (passive) individual often feels misunderstood or used; these feelings are often compounded by the additional feelings of guilt, depression, anxiety, and lowered self-esteem. The recipient of non-assertive (passive) behavior is forced to infer constantly what the other person is really thinking and feeling. This taxing activity leads to frustration, annoyance, and anger by the recipient.

"Aggressive communication" is the communication style which encourages the individual to express feelings and opinions in a punishing, threatening, assaultive, demanding, or hostile manner. Since the aggressive individual chooses to infringe upon the rights of others, aggressive behavior reflects little or no consideration for the rights and feelings of others. Aggressive behavior often results in immediate and more forceful counter-aggression which will most certainly produce long-term strain in a relationship. The recipient of aggressive behavior may experience feelings which range from humiliation and abuse to resentment and anger.

In contrast to non-assertive (passive) communication and aggressive communication, the goal of "assertive communication" is to express one's feelings and opinions directly and honestly; by doing so, the assertive communicator hopes to negotiate reasonable changes to solve interpersonal problems. An assertive communicator can express feelings in a manner that is both personally satisfying and socially effective. While aggressive and non-assertive (passive) communication control the outcome of a given

situation by "shutting off" the other person, assertive communication is the only style of the three which opens the possibility for increased dialogue.

The rationale for assertive communication rather than non-assertive (passive) or aggressive communication is based in the social learning theory that early training rather than anatomy determines personality; assertive behavior is both learned and situationally specific (Galassi and Galassi, 1977). Data suggests that increased assertion leads to increased self-esteem and self-confidence especially among women. In addition, most proponents of assertive communication for women in organizations consider this interpersonal communication style essential if women are to gain their full economic, social, and legal rights in the work force (Osborn and Harris, 1975).

Several investigators, however, suggest that the impact of the communication style may vary with the sex of the communicator (Jabukowski-Spector, 1973; Kelly and Worell, 1977; Cowan and Koziej, 1979). Specifically, these studies suggest that the same assertive act is evaluated more favorably if the person exhibiting the behavior is a male rather than a female. For example, Hull and Schroeder (1979) measured the responses of males and females interacting during role-plays with a female confederate who behaved assertively, non-assertively (passively), or aggressively. Based on semantic differential ratings completed by the subjects, the non-assertive (passive) confederate behavior was perceived as positive, the aggressive confederate behavior was perceived as negative, and the assertive confederate behavior was perceived as fair but unsympathetic, aggressive, and dominant.

In addition, Kelly (1980) had subjects complete an interpersonal attraction inventory after viewing videotaped interactions involving non-assertive (passive), assertive, and aggressive behavior. While the assertive behavior was perceived more positive on presumed competence, ability, and achievement, the assertive behavior was also perceived more negative on measures of likeability, warmth, flexibility, and friendliness. Further, both male and female subjects de-valued the assertive behavior of the female stimulus compared to the male stimulus on measures of likeability, attractiveness, ability, and competence.

It would appear that these findings reinforce the impact of traditional sex-role stereotypes which have historically de-valued assertive behavior for females and have reinforced such behavior for males. Kelly (1980) concluded that it is likely females learn to inhibit their expressions of assertiveness during real-life interactions in anticipation of being disliked even if the individual is clearly faced with unreasonable behavior. For women, the traditional "non-assertive" (passive) role is still the communication style most universally perceived as positive; if women select the "assertive" or "aggressive" styles, they run the risk of being perceived negatively by both males and females.

Implications for Women in Organizations

The impact of an effective interpersonal communication style for women in the work force begins at the moment she considers a work setting; from there, its influence permeates the employment interview, job performance, career advancement, and job termination. Of the three interpersonal communication styles explored in this paper (non-assertive/passive, aggressive, and assertive), few would deny that assertive communication

offers both men and women the greatest growth potential; for women, however, that potential may be the key to full economic, social, and legal recognition in the work force. Unfortunately, the literature also indiates that women's use of assertive communication involves the greatest risk. While assertive communication, in principle, may provide the key to enhancing self-concept, it may also provide the key to rejection and alienation from both male and female co-workers.

With the current emphasis on workshops and seminars geared toward developing specific verbal and nonverbal assertive communication skills, a cursory view of literature in the field provides little insight into the strategy for using assertive skills appropriately. Further, almost no literature has addressed the possible validity of using non-assertive (passive) or aggressive communication styles to meet short-term goals and lay the foundation for assertive communication.

In determining a communication style strategy, perhaps an initial consideration for women is to assess the supervisor's communication style. An understanding of her/his role of women in the organization, prior exposure to women's roles in the organization, and communication styles used with both men and women in the organization may provide some valuable insight into appropriate communication behaviors. While assertive communication may no doubt be the most desirable style as a long-term goal, it may be the least profitable style if it initially terminates the potential for valuable supervisor communication contact. For example, the need to participate in informal influence networks within the organization may be worth the initial trade-off of a passive or aggressive communication style to attain such a goal. While not advisable over the long term, assertive communication may not be the most effective communication style at the outset.

A second consideration for women may be the support system which surrounds them in the work setting. Most proponents of assertive communication skills suggest that a grass-roots support system be developed to assist the communicator. For women, such a support system can provide the essential role models and positive reinforcement; after all, women are defying the core of their identity enveloped in sex-role stereotyping. Bird (1981) reports that it is difficult to break a norm in a work setting until approximately 30% of the work force has made the behavioral change. If this statistic is accurate, a sizable support system is crucial if women are to adopt new communication behaviors as a part of their communication repertoire.

While some assertive communication literature addresses the "irrational beliefs" women hold which may prevent them from developing assertive communication skills, most of the literature focuses on the assets of such behavior rather than the liabilities. Bloom, Coburn, and Pearlman (1975), however, do stress the necessity for women to assess the potential risks when they choose to assert themselves. They suggest the following questions to consider when selecting the appropriate communication style (pp. 80-81):

1. What do I gain from staying non-assertive?
   a. protection from others
   b. praise for conforming to others' expectations
   c. maintenance of a familiar behavior pattern
   d. avoidance of taking the responsibility for initiating or carrying out plans
   e. avoidance of possible conflict/anger/rejection/acceptance of responsibility for my feelings
2. Would I be willing to give up any of the above? Which?
3. What do I lose by being non-assertive?
   a. independence
   b. the power to make decisions
   c. honesty in human relationships

d. others' respect for my rights and wishes
e. my ability to control my emotions (I can deny my own rights for only so long and then I blow up)
f. relaxation, inner tranquility
g. my ability to influence others' decisions, demands, expectations--particularly with regard to myself and what they expect me to do for or with them
h. the satisfaction of initiating and carrying out plans

4. Do the gains of staying non-assertive outweight the losses?
   a. If so, why?
   b. If not, am I willing to make the change by acting assertively?
   c. Can I enlist the support, understanding, and cooperation of others involved either in the situation or in my life?
5. What are my short-term goals? (in my relationships and in my activities)
6. What are my long-term goals?
7. How can assertive behavior help me achieve these goals?

While these questions are general in nature, they can be applied to a variety of situations and can provide the basis for a framework from which to assess the appropriateness of a specific communication style.

The current literature in this topic area ranges from popularized description of assertive communication skills to empirical measurement of perceptual/attitudinal impact on sex roles. This author noted a paucity of descriptive literature from women who have used all three communication styles in career development and have assessed the risks. Such research should focus on successful women in the work force to serve as role models; their experience could provide assistance in assessing short-term and long-term trade-offs of the three communication styles as well as strategies for their use. Follow-up empirical study of specific communication patterns used by women in the work force could provide an even stronger data base for women developing and utilizing various communication styles.

A review of literature also indicates that women's use of assertive communication is often mistaken or perceived as aggressive communication

and that women often opt for non-assertive (passive) communication as the more desirable. Although women deserve the right to make choices concerning their communication style, sex-role stereotyping continues to limit the choices most women can make. While assertive behavior and the androgynous manager may be the prototypes for which we are striving, research clearly indicates that widespread change in these areas will take time; in the interim, women must be informed of the potential risks (gains and losses) of their communication choices. Perhaps Jill Ruckelshaus, noted feminist and lecturer, illustrated the impact of "choice" most effectively when she explained, "It occurred to me when I was 13 and wearing white gloves and Mary Janes and going to dancing school, that no one should have to dance backward all their lives." Continued research in this area will provide women with the basis for informed choices; only then can women move forward toward self-actualization in the work force.

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